

Observing the American Scene: The *Abbé* Correia da Serra in America, 1812–1820

Edgardo Medeiros da Silva
Universidade de Lisboa

Abstract. Foreign visitors to America have provided us with the most insightful observations about the United States, its people, and its institutions. Some of these observations are outright dismissive, while a few are laudatory, others are biased and to a very large extent subjective. The correspondence of José Francisco Correia da Serra (1751–1823), best known as the *Abbé* Correia da Serra, Portugal's Minister Plenipotentiary to the young republic of the United States between 1816 and 1820, offers us a truly remarkable picture of Americans, their society, and politics in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Drawing on the letters he wrote to the most representative public men in American society at the time, this paper examines some of the *Abbé*'s observations, comments, and advice on the great issues of the day, whether on the treacherous talk of the supporters of the Hartford Convention in the New England states, or the establishment of institutions of higher learning in Virginia and Pennsylvania, or even the importance of public opinion in a free, egalitarian society such as that of the United States. Correia da Serra was a true representative of the Portuguese Enlightenment, a man of varied scientific interests and strong liberal ideas, most notably those associated with the founding of the American republic. His thoughts on the great American experiment in representative democracy, in line with the ideological precepts of the Jeffersonian-Republicans, are an enduring legacy to those interested in understanding the challenges faced by the United States in the decades that followed its independence from Great Britain.

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José Francisco Correia da Serra (1751–1823) was a true representative of the Portuguese Enlightenment, a man of varied scientific interests and strong liberal ideas.¹ Although Correia da Serra, or simply “the *Abbé*,” was best known as a botanist in intellectual circles in Europe and America, he was also interested in geology, natural history, and politics, as his writings attest. Born in Serpa, Portugal, at the age of six he moved to Italy with his parents, where he was educated, returning to Portugal only in 1777, twenty years later, to be more precise.² Together with the second Duke of Lafões, Don João Carlos de Bragança Sousa e Ligne (1719–1806), he was the driving force behind the founding of the Royal Academy

of Sciences in Lisbon, before being forced to leave Portugal in 1795. The reasons for his departure remain unclear to this day, but are thought to have been related to his political views and quite possibly to connections with free-masonry.³ What we know is that he embarked for England in a rather hasty manner, under a different family name (“Porto”) in March of 1795, and while in the British capital he was appointed counselor and buying agent of the Portuguese legation in London, a post which he held for a short period of time. After resigning from this position in 1802, he went on to Paris, where he stayed until his departure for the United States of America in the year 1812. The *Abbé*’s self-imposed exile, both in London and Paris, allowed him to establish a scientific reputation among European scholars of the time (he was a member of the Linnean Society and the Royal Society, among others), as his religious feelings were never particularly strong, being more inclined, in my view, to the world of science than to that of God.

Labeled by those in positions of power in his native Portugal as an *estrangeirado*—a word used to describe in negative terms those nationals who had been educated abroad and were viewed with suspicion and mistrust for their “foreign” ideas and influence upon their return—the *Abbé* was an outsider in his own country. When he died, aged seventy-two, he had lived only twenty-six years in Portugal, approximately one-third of his entire life. His diasporic life path, like that of many of his fellow citizens now and then, corresponds to a common pattern of existence which Portuguese citizens have taken throughout the country’s history.⁴ There is no doubt, as Helder Macedo has aptly put it, that life paths such as these correspond to “uma experiência de fronteiras, que é o mesmo que dizer uma experiência de divisões e de continuidades” (“a frontier experience, which is to say, an experience made up of separations and continuities”) (Macedo 19).⁵ The *Abbé* Correia da Serra was neither an emigrant, nor an involuntary exile, but in his letters and dispatches we can detect a feeling of estrangement and non-belonging which has indelibly marked the lives of those forced to live abroad, frequently outsiders both in their countries of origin and in their adopted lands.⁶ Drawing on his correspondence (see Bourdon; Davis), it is my aim in this paper to briefly look at what the *Abbé* Correia da Serra has to tell us about the United States in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, centered on four main areas of activity during his eight-year stay on US soil: politics, diplomacy, education, and the press.⁷ In line with other well-known foreign visitors to America, Crèvecoeur, Tocqueville, Trollope, Dickens, Bryce, to name just a few, the observations Correia da Serra offers us on American politics and society in the first decades of the nineteenth century remain particularly insightful for those interested in the early cultural and diplomatic relations between Portugal and the United States.⁸

The Political Scene

The fact that Correia da Serra was a strong admirer of the liberal ideas associated with the founding of the American republic weighed heavily in his choice of the United States as his place of “intellectual exile.” Carrying with him letters of introduction from well-known European and American intellectuals—some of

whom he had met during his Parisian exile, including Joel Barlow, Alexander von Humboldt, Dupont de Nemours, and the Marquis of Lafayette—he arrived in Norfolk, Virginia, on February 21st, 1812, a few months before the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain was officially declared, the first time the US had done so against another nation.⁹ Correia da Serra set up residence in Philadelphia, the country's most important cultural and political center at the time, awaiting his (eventual) nomination as Portugal's diplomatic representative to the United States, which only occurred in 1816. He arrived in America at a particularly trying time in the young nation's history. The country was politically divided as a result of the declaration of war against Great Britain, with sectional feelings undermining national purposes and complicating the task of building a unified nation in the aftermath of President Thomas Jefferson's embargo on trade with Great Britain. Jefferson's embargo had seriously harmed the business interests of New Englanders. Its impact on the economy of those states culminated in the so-called Hartford Convention, when twenty-six New England Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut, between December 15th, 1814 and January 4th, 1815, to show their opposition to the continuation of the war against Great Britain, threatening to create a Northern Confederacy and abandon the Union.

Correia da Serra witnessed the events that led up to the Hartford Convention, as he tells former President Thomas Jefferson in a letter dated September 20th, 1814. In this letter, he writes that he had spent three months the year before in New England where he met with people of "all parties, but chiefly with the leaders of the opposition" (Davis 134–35). ("Opposition" refers here to the Federalists, the political opponents of the states' rights advocates, with whom Jefferson's name is associated.) Correia da Serra adds that he had gathered the impression that their talk was treacherous and that it endangered the continuity of the Union, expressing as well his own apprehension about the outcome of these political maneuvers: "Treason is more to be feared in the present moment than in any epoch of your history" (Davis 135). There was no doubt in the *Abbé's* mind that the supporters of the Convention were moved by personal interest and "party feelings," rather than the public good, characterizing those who took part in the Convention as "dupes whom the leaders keep together by many fold artifices," but he also felt that the latter were "at the bottom very good Americans" (Davis 135). To counteract their political activity, Correia da Serra suggests to Jefferson the creation of "committees of public safety" (militia groups, in effect) in the New England states. These committees, in Correia da Serra's opinion, were "an American institution," which, if properly organized, "could do much good and prevent the execution of much treasonable plans and practices" (Davis 136). He adds that these committees should include men of all persuasions, Jeffersonian-Republicans as well as Federalists, but that their leaders, the "noted party men," should not be allowed to take part in them. Finally, the *Abbé* observes that committees of public safety are especially needed in times of national danger, because they bring together those who are sincere about their motivations, driving away those who are guilty and consequently oppose their formation. All this is very ironic, and perhaps

Correia da Serra was not aware of it, but it was precisely Jefferson, as Vice-President to John Adams, and James Madison, respectively, who had inaugurated this kind of treasonous talk when they secretly wrote the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798.¹⁰ Correia da Serra ends his letter by apologizing to Jefferson for “meddling” in the internal affairs of the US, asking him to destroy the letter “because a Portuguese is in circumstances worse than if he had sworn allegiance to the Crown of Great Britain” (Davis 136).¹¹ As a long-standing ally of Great Britain, Portugal had not adhered to Napoleon’s Continental Blockade and thus had not closed its ports to that country, something which the US had done. Correia da Serra feared this might be regarded as an unfriendly action towards the US on the part of the Portuguese government, now relocated to Rio de Janeiro precisely because of Napoleon’s Continental Blockade.

During his annual pilgrimages to Monticello, Correia da Serra developed a very close relationship with Thomas Jefferson, whom he admired because he believed the late President was “above minutious party feelings” (Davis 219). In one of his letters to Jefferson, Correia da Serra writes that he wants to bring with him to Monticello a young American “who wishes to have the honour of your acquaintance” (Davis 218–19). The name of this young American is Robert Walsh, Jr., editor of periodicals and well-known essayist, who, according to Correia da Serra, had begun his youthful career with the Federalists but was brought to better ways of thinking by the excesses of the Boston stamps during the war (Davis 219). That is, the young man had switched his political stance from Federalism to Jeffersonism, a change of mind of which the *Abbé* clearly approves. In another instance, siding with those in favor of the extension of slavery to the new territories in the Union, the *Abbé* took the liberty of sending with one of his letters to T. R. Randolph, Governor of Virginia, a pamphlet written by the Federalists of New York and New England against the extension of slave labor to the territories of Missouri and Arkansas.¹² In it, Correia da Serra warns Randolph about the dangers of this policy, as the removal of the 3/5 representation of blacks in Congress would reduce the slave states in Congress to a minority of seats (Davis 278). Correia da Serra clearly defends here the maintenance of the *status quo* of the slave states in Congress and indirectly the system of bondage in the country as a whole, a position which is evidently understandable given that Portugal was still directly involved in the slave trade at the time.¹³

Correia da Serra kept himself informed about the latest political developments in Europe during his sojourn in the United States. On the subject of Napoleon Bonaparte’s abdication and the restoration of the Bourbons, for example, he reveals in a letter to John Vaughan (1756–1841)—librarian of the American Philosophical Society and one of his closest American friends—his misgivings about the French Revolution, which he deemed too radical: “The news from Europe are not so good as you suppose; it is only a new face of this Proteus like revolution” (Davis 133–34). As we know, on April 11th, 1814, Napoleon had abdicated and Louis XVIII recovered the French throne. Even though the Bourbon king did not restore the institutions of pre-revolutionary

France, this had major political implications for the whole continent since it meant a blow to the progressive forces in Europe, a return to monarchic rule and the principles of the *ancien régime*. True, Louis XVIII had granted a charter to the French people, allowing them to form a representative government, but Correia da Serra was doubtful of the intentions and effectiveness of the measures, as his letters show. His misgivings about the Congress of Vienna and the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which aimed to re-establish the balance of power among European nations following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, were also real in the sense that they might have a direct impact on his personal life. This worried his friend Thomas Jefferson, concerned as he was about Correia da Serra's future following the events described above, as this passage from one of his letters to the *Abbé* (January 1st, 1816) attests:

What effect will this apparent restoration of the Bourbons have on your movements? Will it tempt your return? I do not see in this a restoration of quiet. On the contrary I consider France as in a more volcanic state than at any preceding time. There must be an explosion, and one of the most destructive in character. (Davis 167)

Portuguese-American Diplomacy

Life would not be easy for Correia da Serra as a diplomat in the US capital, with two issues having come to dominate his activity there: the never-ending problem of American privateers and the Pernambuco Rebellion, the first instance of a movement for the independence of Brazil (more details below).¹⁴ Privateering, whereby privately owned ships could legally attack and seize any enemy vessel, was regarded by many as an organized form of piracy. During the wars of independence in South America the insurgent governments recruited warships in the US and other countries to disrupt trade and capture merchant vessels belonging to their European colonial masters. This applied to both Portugal and Spain. Correia da Serra believed that preying on Portuguese ships and their cargoes, for instance, would not stop “enquanto a maré dos partidos e o governo forem excessivamente democráticos” (“whilst the tendency of political parties and the government happen to be excessively democratic”) (Bourdon 544), that is, too radical, or “Jacobin,” in the political jargon of the time. In an earlier dispatch to Count da Barca, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Correia da Serra had described Mr. Rush, the Acting Secretary of State, as being “do partido jacobino, protector dos rebeldes espanhois” (“a member of the Jacobin party, protector of the Spanish rebels”), a person who “favorece por todos os modos que restam em seu poder todas as revoltas que houver em toda a parte do mundo” (“favors by all means within his power every revolt that might occur anywhere in the world”) (Bourdon 290).

As a diplomat, Correia da Serra was worried about the repercussions of a law recently approved by Congress whereby a black person captured on board any ship (of any nation)—slave ship, that is—would be taken to the newly founded colonies on African soil. His apprehension stemmed from the fact that Portuguese ships were involved in the slave trade and huge profits could be made by American privateers preying on these. Because Correia da Serra was convinced Americans

were strongly moved by an “eagerness for money” (Bourdon 562), in one of his diplomatic dispatches he accuses the US government of connivance with the pirates in order to satisfy the “capitalists”: “depois da paz geral ficam a estes capitalistas que ele [governo americano] sempre quer contentes quanto lhe for possível por muitas razões” (“after a general peace, these capitalists linger on, which it [the American government] wishes to keep satisfied by all means and for various reasons”) (Bourdon 543).¹⁵

Correia da Serra’s most serious diplomatic challenge was no doubt the Pernambuco Rebellion, mentioned above. On March 6th, 1817, a republic was proclaimed in Pernambuco, Recife, aimed at setting up an independent state in Brazil modeled on the American republic. This regional separatist movement, comprised of large landowners and slave holders who opposed the central government in Rio, sent envoys abroad to seek international recognition and possibly, it was believed, to buy weapons and ammunition.¹⁶ We have the first reference to the presence of the Pernambuco emissaries in a letter to Gilmer (August 21st, 1817) where Correia da Serra characterizes their activities as “intrigues” and where he also says that the rebellion was put down by Portuguese authorities in seventy-seven days (which was the case—the republic had been declared on March 6th). He calls the emissaries from Pernambuco “the conspirators of Pernambuco” (Bourdon 277), while John Quincy Adams, the Secretary of State at the time, in a letter to Jefferson, refers to the envoy from the seceding region of Brazil as “the Pernambuco ambassador,” adding that he “could not but sympathize with him” (Bourdon 285). It is at this point in time that Correia da Serra’s predicament as a diplomat of an Old World monarchy and a man of liberal, rational ideas emerges, more precisely, when he fails to understand the aspirations of those in favor of the independent movements in Latin America. In one of his letters to James Madison (May 16th, 1817), President James Monroe unmistakably points out this inconsistency in the *Abbé*’s position when he writes: “He partakes strongly of the anti-revolutionary feeling on the subject, more than is strictly consistent with his liberal and philanthropical character” (Bourdon 270).

Despite being a man of liberal ideas, there is no evidence to suggest that he supported a republican form of government. Quite the contrary, in effect, as the following passage, where Correia da Serra expresses his monarchist sympathies, seems to indicate: “e tenho agora uma prova mais além das muitas que já tinha que o Anjo da Guarda da nossa Monarquia é dos mais poderosos e vigilantes, e é certamente ingratidão nossa fazer-lhe tão pouca festa” (“and now I have proof, besides all the other evidence I had already collected, that the Guardian Angel of our Monarchy is a most powerful and vigilant one, and it is certainly ingratitude on our part not to recognize that”) (Bourdon 539). On another occasion, while discussing the activity of the well-known revolutionaries Simon Bolivar and José Artigas, Correia da Serra remarks that he wishes he could see “Brazil circundado de governos monárquicos para de algum modo sapear a actividade daninha que aqui vejo” (“Brazil surrounded by monarchic governments that could keep a close eye on all the malicious activity that I can see here”) (Bourdon 544–45). The truth

is, the excesses of the French Revolution had remained alive in the minds of Europeans (and Americans as well) and Correia was no exception.

A fascinating topic in Correia da Serra's correspondence concerns the activity of the so-called colonization societies, which he labels as "seita política" ("political sect"). He felt that Portugal could benefit from their activity if the ex-slaves these American societies wanted to settle back in Africa, "pretos e mulatos livres, ao menos os que são católicos romanos" ("negroes and free mulattoes, especially those who are Roman Catholic"), should find their way to Brazil, adding, "sem custarem um só cruzado à Fazenda Real e sendo a viagem paga por estes entusiásticos puritanos" ("costing not a single *cruzado* to the Royal Treasury, the voyage being paid by these enthusiastic Puritans") (Bourdon 253). (We should not forget that "entusiásticos" meant "fanatical" in those days.) Should Portugal fail to take advantage of this opportunity, other nations would certainly not miss the chance to do so, most notably the English, who wished to send them to their colony of Sierra Leone in order to start "uma república democrática em África!" ("a democratic republic in Africa!") (Bourdon 543).¹⁷ Elsewhere, he writes that these colonies are a "perigoso fermento democrático" ("a dangerous democratic yeast") (Bourdon 552). There is no indication in Correia da Serra's correspondence that he questioned the existence of slavery. What is clear, though, is that he thought the idea of expelling ex-slaves from US territory was not a very intelligent one.

Education and Higher Learning

From the correspondence between Correia da Serra and former President Thomas Jefferson emerges the idea that both men believed religious feeling could have a detrimental effect on the way institutions of higher education should function. Moreover, both men thought that the only way to counteract "fanaticism and nonsense" was by having educated, liberal clergymen in universities. The *Abbé*, therefore, thoroughly approved of Jefferson's ideas for a state university in Virginia (Central College), where church and state would be clearly separated, as he states in the passage below:

The prospect of seeing a seminary¹⁸ for the American youth unshackled from the trammels of clerical influence and direction, and where really useful sciences may be induced into young minds is a vision so congenial to my feelings, that I cannot abstain from frequently reminding it, and taking a hearty interest in its process. (Davis 219–20)

To his mind, therefore, only a rational form of religion, free from superstition and dogma, should exist in universities, especially in a country determined to consolidate its system of higher education. Correia da Serra identified three major difficulties surrounding the establishment of institutions of higher learning in America, in connection with the establishment of a medical school in Philadelphia, namely: a) "the mediocrity of views"; b) "the mediocrity of science"; and c) the intellectual dominance of New England, because as soon as an institution is created "people of great and contagious mediocrity, chiefly New Englanders squat in them, and the seminaries become ricketed in point of science" (Davis 259). It should be

noted that in the early 1700s, while still a colony, New England probably had one of the highest literacy rates in the world and its intellectual prominence was undisputed in the remaining territories. Being a man of the church, it is paradoxical that Correia da Serra should equate mediocrity in universities with the presence of the clergy, a “disease” being created, as he puts it, whenever “clerical instruction” is favored in institutions of higher learning.

Correia da Serra praises Jefferson’s efforts in establishing a quality institution in Virginia, a state which “by its central situation, size, resources, and above all the character of its white population, is and will always be in your continent, what France is to Europe; no change can happen in her without influencing all the other states of that part of the world” (Davis 260–61).¹⁹ The University of Virginia, founded in 1819, was deliberately secular, unlike Harvard and Yale, both of which were denominational, the first being Unitarian and the second Congregational. Princeton, on the other hand, had been founded by Presbyterians.

Other indications of Correia da Serra’s manifest interest in America’s incipient academia include his advice on the organization of university departments, an example of which are his recommendations for the future University of Pennsylvania. He also made several suggestions on the choice of suitable candidates to fill academic posts, a case in point being the candidate for the Chair of Chemistry at the South Carolina College, later the University of South Carolina. Likewise there was his outline of the procedures followed at some European universities (Rome, Naples, and Portugal) for the appointment of faculty staff, so that everyone will be “eclairée and dark intrigues bridled, and aristocratic influence limited” (Davis 269).²⁰

It was not only academia that caught the attention of Correia da Serra during his sojourn on US soil. While there, he did not fail to notice the propensity of Americans towards technological innovation. In his diplomatic dispatches, exchanged with the Portuguese Foreign Ministers, the *Abbé* makes positive comments on American industry and technology: “A mão-de-obra é aqui muito cara, e esta nação extremamente activa. Com industria [sic] infinita tem ajuntado máquinas e engenhos de toda a parte do mundo, aperfeiçoado algumas e inventado outras” (“labor costs are quite expensive here, and this nation is extremely industrious. With infinite industry they have assembled machines and mechanical devices from all over the world, perfected some and invented others”) (Bourdon 222). In another instance, clearly thinking about the possibility of exporting American machinery to Brazil and Portugal, Correia da Serra alludes to “máquinas engenhosas” (“ingenious machines”), the workings of which it is possible to copy for free (Bourdon 260).²¹

Correia da Serra also recommends in his correspondence with the heads of Portuguese diplomacy the introduction of steamships in the rivers of Brazil similar to the ones used by Americans. He observes in one of his dispatches that this will improve communications and trade with Brazil’s hinterland and render unnecessary the reliance on Indians whenever it was necessary to sail along the Amazon River. He warns Foreign Minister Vila Nova Portugal, however, that

American businessmen cannot be trusted, as they “abalancham-se a tudo e, ao mesmo tempo, que nos estão roubando por mar, estão especulando sobre o que podem ganhar connosco por outros modos” (“take their chances at everything and while they are stealing from us at sea, they are at the same time speculating as to how they can profit from us by other means”) (Bourdon 502). In other words, the *Abbé*’s appreciation for the entrepreneurial spirit of Americans is obvious, but it is no less true that in other matters he felt it was necessary to deal with businessmen with the utmost care: “A industria em todo o genro [*sic*] é a parte brilhante do seu character. Oxalá não fossem tão velhacos e tão temíveis em outros importantes pontos de vista!” (“Industry in all its various forms is the most brilliant aspect of their character. It is just unfortunate that they happen to be so unprincipled and terrifying in many other respects”) (Bourdon 507).

Finally, Correia da Serra laments the fact that some of the immigration to the United States should not find its way to Brazil, especially the skilled labor force arriving from England, France, and Germany: “[...] à quantidade de bons artífices ingleses, franceses, alemães, que vem chegando todos os dias faz-me continuamente desejar que algum meio se possa achar para que parte desta útil imigração corra para lá para aumento desse império, sobretudo se pudesse ser sem peso à Real Fazenda” (“the fine quality of English, French, and German craftsmen arriving here every day makes me constantly wish that part of this useful immigration should find its way [to Brazil], to enlarge that empire, and especially at no expense to the Royal Treasury”) (Bourdon 225). In one of his dispatches to Count da Barca, as well, Correia da Serra asks for “uma lista dos ofícios e artes mecânicas de que há maior necessidade, para não só poder animar os que se apresentarem, mas também procurar e incitar outros a que vão sem que isso cause o menor gasto à Real Fazenda” (“a list of all crafts and mechanical arts of which there is a greater need, not only to raise the spirits of those who present themselves, but also to search for and encourage others to leave, at no expense to the Royal Treasury”) (Bourdon 231).

Public Opinion and the Press

From very early on, the press played an important role in the political life of America. It was forceful and energetic in denouncing abuse and misrule in public life and a powerful tool in maintaining an educated citizenry. The *Abbé* Correia da Serra understood well the power of a free press in an open and democratic society such as the United States and how this free press could be used by governments to inform or sway public opinion. He remarks to Jefferson (December 9th, 1814), while giving him an overview of the political situation in Europe from the latest English and French papers he has received, that the US has no allies in Europe except for its continental press and public opinion, “a very powerful one,” indeed (Davis 137). Commenting on the progress of the peace conference being held in Vienna, Correia da Serra observes as well that the European press, conservative and anti-republican, is portraying the US as a “nest of anti-monarchical Jacobinism and this government the [tool?] of Bonaparte, to be severely chastised and crushed

like him” (Davis 137).²² This was particularly true of British papers, which tended not to be sympathetic towards the US on account of Jefferson’s embargo of 1807. Correia da Serra notes that all European eyes were turned to the US government for its defiance of Great Britain, a situation that was causing a certain degree of admiration in European public opinion.

Correia da Serra’s reputation in the diplomatic circles of Washington must have been quite strong for he had no qualms in advising President James Madison to bring out “an official communication” (in today’s jargon, a press release) to inform foreign ministers and the public at large that General Andrew Jackson had entered Pensacola (a Spanish possession at the time) with the sole purpose of expelling US enemies from the area, having no intention of questioning its lawful owner, the Spanish Crown.²³ In this official communication, Madison should follow, according to the *Abbé*, the “style which Talleyrand is now preaching” (Davis 146), that is, the US government should favor diplomacy and negotiation over war or conflict. This, Correia da Serra feels, will create a wide-ranging goodwill amidst European public opinion, rather sensitive at the time on the subject of New World colonies. This official communication will have a tremendous impact on European public opinion, Correia da Serra maintains, putting it on the side of the US: “Retaliation in kind is now very dangerous and out of season” (Davis 147). Correia da Serra closes his letter without any kind of parsimony:

I do not ask pardon of speaking so freely and cordially to the chief of a great nation; on the contrary I consider it as the highest compliment I can pay to his personal qualities, and a proof of the high esteem and veneration with which I am, Sir, Your most obliged humble servant, J. Corrèa de Serra.²⁴ (Davis 147)

America’s press, though, did not see political or military affairs in the New World in quite the same way. Indeed, the greatest damage was caused to Correia da Serra’s reputation, both as a diplomat and a man of science, following the above-mentioned Pernambuco Rebellion and the emissaries sent to the US to seek the recognition of an independent Brazil. In its January 17th, 1818 edition, the editor of the *Aurora*, one of the more radical American papers, based in Philadelphia, accused the *Abbé*, unquestionably a man of great scientific qualities and privileged access to “political society,” of acting in a dual function, that of priest and politician (ctd. in Bourdon 352). For the editor, Correia da Serra was the agent of a despotic system, maybe even a spy, a defender of the feudal institutions of Europe from which America had freed itself. In America, there are no lords or barons, and citizens enjoy freedom, he remarks, “the unfortunate blacks excepted” (ctd. in Bourdon 352). Thus, it was inconceivable that a man of liberal ideas, a philosopher as well as a scientist, should oppose the emancipation of the peoples of South America. Neither *The Baltimore Patriot* nor *The Democratic Press*, two other radical papers, was as critical of the *Abbé*.

As the diplomatic representative of an Old World colonial power, Correia da Serra felt vilified by America’s radical press, in particular after the notification he published in a number of magazines, including the *National Intelligencer*, declaring

that the port of Pernambuco had been closed to foreign ships. His words to Portugal's Foreign Minister at the time were to this effect: "toda essa manada de gazetas se tem voltado contra mim por esta notificação, e sou agora diariamente mordido com furor por elas" ("all that herd of gazettes has turned against me because of this notification, and I am now constantly bitten by their rage") (Bourdon 294). When thirty pirates were executed in Boston, Baltimore, and New Orleans, the editor of the *Aurora* told its readers: "The *Abbé* must now be satisfied. There are ten for his philosophy, ten for his piety, and ten for his diplomacy" (ctd. in Bourdon 548).²⁵ The fact is that America's more radical press welcomed the emergence of the liberation movements in Central and South America, and newspapers like the *Georgetown Messenger*, the *National Intelligencer*, and even the *Boston Patriot*, all included on their pages words of support for the rebels and their causes. Naturally, in these articles Europe's colonial powers are invariably presented as despotic and tyrannical, without any concerns for the needs and aspirations of the settlers in their colonial possessions. Their colorful political language, rhetorical for the most part, was designed to appeal to the sentiment of American readers, as we can gather from the tone of these words by the editor of the *National Intelligencer*: "Thus the New World is destined by all bounteous Providence as an asylum for the persecuted of all nations and the residence of that noblest of all productions, a free and independent race of men" (ctd. in Bourdon 273).

Notwithstanding all of this, Correia da Serra made use of the American press to put out his message and that of the government he represented. He knew the mechanisms required to reach public opinion, an example of this being the "livrinho que estou fazendo em segredo, no qual, debaixo de forma inteiramente americana, se exporão todas as iniquidades que tanto trabalho se tem dado a pôr no escuro, e sobretudo o dano que isto lhes irá causar, que é para eles a maior de todas as razões" ("this booklet I have been writing in secret, which in perfect American fashion will reveal all the inequities they have tried so hard to hide, including the damage it will cause, which for them is the most important of reasons") (Bourdon 497).²⁶ Right before his departure from the US, Correia da Serra tells Vaughan that he wants to continue to subscribe to the *National Intelligencer*, the *National Gazette*, and the *North American Review*, the last two publications being more conservative papers and thus closer to his political views.

Conclusion

As his stay on American soil progressed, it seems that Correia da Serra became ever more disappointed with American society and politics, in particular with the excessive materialism of Americans. He confessed his disappointment and frustration with the values of a democratic polity such as the United States in a letter to an English friend, R. A. Salisbury, of the Linnean Society in London:

I'm tired of five years of this laborious mission, and most heartily tired of democratic society. Rational Liberty can be fully enjoyed under other forms; do not believe half of what is said in Europe of this country, and of what they most ostentatiously publish and say themselves. They have the vanity of believing it all, but except in eagerness for money

... they are not yet comparable to ripe European nations, and they are not less rotten.
(Davis 74)

As I hope to have shown, the *Abbé* Correia da Serra's access to US circles of power, both political and intellectual, allowed him informed observations on various aspects of the life of this young nation, confirming his wide-ranging knowledge and expertise in various domains. His legacy as a man of science and culture has endured, but the same cannot be said about his role as a diplomat representing an Old World colonial power. The political winds blowing from Central and South America associated with the independence movements emerging there and the unrelenting activity of the privateers preying on Portuguese shipping interests proved to be too much for the aging diplomat, putting him in an untenable position: that of being true to his ideals and beliefs as a man imbued with the philosophical principles of the age of reason, or that of defending the *status quo* of an old European monarchy within a world order about to be dominated by a new player. Thus, one may conclude by saying that our illustrious *Abbé* did not feel at home in his native Portugal, where the church still held considerable sway over education and science and the political climate continued to be reactionary, nor in America, where political parties and the press were too free and too radical for his taste and temperament.

Notes

¹ The ideas associated with the European Enlightenment—scientific and intellectual progress, political and religious freedom, anti-clericalism—reached Portugal in the mid-eighteenth century by the hand of the so-called *estrangeirados*, Portuguese intellectuals who had resided abroad and brought back with them the ideals of the age. Among these are the names of Francisco Xavier de Oliveira (1702–1783), diplomat; Ribeiro Sanches (1699–1783), physician, philosopher, and pedagogue; Jacob de Castro Sarmiento (1692–1762), physician; João Jacinto de Magalhães (1722–1790), physicist; Félix de Avelar Brotero (1744–1828), botanist; Luís António Verney (1713–1792), pedagogue. A key figure in the Portuguese Enlightenment was Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo (1699–1782), Marquis of Pombal, who as Prime Minister to Dom José I, King of Portugal, carried out major reforms in the educational system at all levels. This included the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1759, who heretofore had had a monopoly on Portuguese education.

² His parents were Luis Dias Correia, a medical doctor, and Francisca Paula Luísa de Leon. They set up residence in Rome and Naples between 1757 and 1771. Correia da Serra's relationship with Esther Delavigne, a woman he met during his Parisian stay, produced one child, Eduardo José Correia da Serra, born in 1803.

³ It has been suggested that he may have been a member of a free-masonry lodge set up in Portugal in 1794, named "Virtute I," together with the Duque de Lafões, David Humphreys, the American minister in Portugal at the time, Thomas Hickling, the American vice-consul in the Azores, as well as the *Abbé* himself. Cf. Michael Teague, *Abade José Correia da Serra* 63. This may have come to the attention of Diogo Inácio de Pina Manique, the all-powerful Police Superintendent of the Court and Realm.

⁴ The *Abbé's* finances were far from satisfactory. There are innumerable references in his letters and dispatches to that effect. Moreover, some members of his family, namely his younger sisters, Ana José, and Maria, depended on him financially.

⁵ All translations from Portuguese into English are done by the author of this essay.

⁶ "Duality of the migratory experience" (my translation) is the expression used by the coordinators of a recently published volume on the Portuguese diaspora, entitled *Portugal pelo Mundo Disperso* (2013). See, "Introduction" 11.

⁷ For this paper, I have relied on two major sources of primary materials: Léon Bourdon, *José Corrêa da Serra—Ambassadeur du Royaume-Uni de Portugal et Brésil à Washington, 1816–1820*, and Richard Beale Davis, *The Abbé Corrêa in America, 1812–1820*, with a preface by Gordon S. Brown and an afterword by Léon Bourdon (Providence, Rhode Island: Gávea-Brown, 1993 [1955]). Bourdon compiled Corrêa da Serra's letters in the original language in which they were written: French, English, or Portuguese. In my text, I have opted to keep the original language in which the *Abbé* corresponded, offering my English translation in brackets. Punctuation has been added whenever necessary for the sake of clarity.

⁸ Examples of the renewed interest in the early diplomatic relations between the United States and Portugal, as well as in the life of Corrêa da Serra, include the exhibition, “Relações entre Portugal e os Estados Unidos da América na Época das Luzes,” organized by the Torre do Tombo, between January and March 1997, and the publication of a new scientific biography by Ana Simões, Maria Paula Diogo, and Ana Carneiro. A Portuguese translation of the letters compiled by Richard Beale Davis has also been published thanks to the generous support of the Luso-American Foundation for Development. See, *O Abade Corrêa da Serra da América, 1812–1820*.

⁹ The War of 1812, fought in the context of the Napoleonic Wars, was officially declared on June 12th of that year. Among the reasons for this military conflict between the United States and its former colonial power were the trade restrictions resulting from Britain's continuing war with France, the impressment of American merchant sailors, British support for American Indian tribes, and quite possibly an interest in annexing Canada on the part of the young nation.

¹⁰ The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions (or Resolves) of 1798 were approved by the legislatures of these states and essentially maintained that any act of Congress not authorized by the Constitution could be declared unconstitutional and thus nullified by the states in question. This restricted and limited interpretation of the Constitution came to be known as strict constructionism.

¹¹ Obviously the letter survived and it can be accessed at the Library of Congress. This letter shows the level of intimacy that existed between the two men.

¹² Davis identifies as the probable pamphlet, *Free remarks on the spirit of the Federal Constitution, the practice of the Federal Government, and the obligation of the Union, respecting the exclusion of slavery from the new territories of the United States*, Philadelphia, 1819 (278, note 344).

¹³ Portugal's track record on the subject of slavery is a poor one: it abolished slavery in 1819, but allowed the transatlantic slave trade to continue until 1836; it signed a treaty with Great Britain to restrict the slave trade in 1810; it signed another treaty with Great Britain in 1815 declaring Portuguese slave trade north of the Equator illegal; it conceded the right to search its ships in 1817; it abolished slavery in its African colonies in 1869. In the case of Brazil, this country outlawed slave trade in 1851, but only abolished slavery in 1888.

¹⁴ In his farewell letter to Corrêa da Serra (October 24th, 1820), Jefferson defines *avant la lettre* what was to be the Monroe Doctrine: “Nothing is so important as that America shall separate itself from the system of Europe, establish her own, our circumstances, our pursuits, our interests are distinct. The principles of our policy should be so also. All entanglements with that quarter of the globe should be avoided if we mean that peace and justice shall be the polar stars of the American societies” [*sic*] (Davis 298–99). Jefferson is reproducing George Washington's words in his “Farewell Address.”

¹⁵ The slave contraband was apparently being done under French and Spanish flags, and Corrêa da Serra feared it might soon be done under the Portuguese flag as well.

¹⁶ Antônio Gonçalves da Cruz arrived in Washington on May 15th of that year to get US support for the rebel state.

¹⁷ Notice the use of double exclamation marks.

¹⁸ In nineteenth-century English the word “seminary” could also refer to secular schools of higher education. In a number of instances, the *Abbé* uses the expression “literary seminaries.”

¹⁹ Notice the reference to “white population” and how things would turn out quite differently precisely because of the non-white element in its population.

²⁰ The practice was called “Concorso” in Italy and “Opposition” in Portugal (letter to Jefferson, dated October 2nd, 1819). The details of the appointments are as follows: when a Chair becomes vacant, a) a public advertisement is made all over the country; b) candidates are admitted and registered on a given day; c) academic members gather to choose a text to be discussed; d) candidates

remain in a library a full day writing their commentary on the text; e) the following day the candidates speak for an hour on the subject of the text in front of the examiners and the public in general (they also hand in the notes made the day before in the library); f) the professors choose three of the candidates whom they think are the best. Cf. Davis 268–9.

²¹ In spite of what Correia da Serra says, the US clearly lagged behind Great Britain, the most industrialized nation at the time. In fact, little is known of the kind of changes happening in the American economy at the time, with respect to the extent of the industrialization or urbanization of the country. Cf. Gordon S. Wood 311.

²² Davis supplies the word “tool” to reconstruct the meaning of this sentence as the original word is missing in Correia da Serra’s text.

²³ General Andrew Jackson’s invasion of West Florida not only created a major diplomatic incident with the government of Spain, but also with that of Great Britain, especially after the trial and execution of two British citizens, Alexander George Arbuthnot and Robert C. Ambrister, accused of inciting the Creek and Seminole Indians against the US.

²⁴ Correia da Serra discusses the settlement of Louisiana as well as the border disputes between Spain and France in connection with their own territories, Florida and Louisiana, respectively, in a letter to Francis Walker Gilmer (February 6th, 1816). Cf. Davis 168.

²⁵ Cf. another reference to Correia da Serra as a “philosophical ambassador” in Bourdon (551).

²⁶ The pamphlet was entitled “An Appeal to the Government and Congress of the United States, Against the Depredations Committed by American Privateers, on the Commerce of Nations at Peace with Us,” printed in New York, in 1819, and signed, “By An American Citizen” (qtd. in Davis 357).

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Edgardo Medeiros da Silva holds a PhD in North American Culture. He is an assistant professor of English at the School of Social and Political Sciences at Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal.